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CARAVAN CITIES: THE ROMAN NEAR EAST AND LONG-DISTANCE TRADE BY LAND

FERGUS MILLAR

My title, *Caravan Cities*, is intended to recall the evocative book by Rostovtzeff, published in 1932.[1] In it he gave a vivid sketch of some of the wonderful remains to be seen then – and to be seen even better now – in the huge area of the Near East ruled by Rome: Petra and Gerasa (Jerash) in Jordan; Palmyra in the desert and Dura-Europos on the Euphrates, both in Syria. To say that these were 'caravan cities' is to say something more than merely that trade passed through them. It is to say that they owed their character as cities to trade: not to local exchanges of products, but to long-distance trade, to caravans. Given the overtones of the word 'caravan' there is a rather strong implication that we are talking about camel-trains, travelling vast distances over the desert.

In the case of Palmyra in particular there has been a tendency to think of such cities, quite explicitly, as having been like ports; hence Javier Teixidor's book of 1984 called the city 'un port romain du désert'; while Ernest Will's of 1992 was subtitled 'La Venise des sables'.[2] Given the keen interest with which we await Geoffrey Rickman's study of Roman ports, it seemed appropriate to use the analogy expressed in these titles, and to ask how far it is justifiable to see any of the cities of the Near Eastern provinces as having been like ports, functioning as centres for long-distance overland trade with the Asian land-mass.

As will shortly become clear, there are immense problems in the evidence, and many questions which we would like to answer will remain unanswered. But we do have one absolutely secure starting-point, namely the incontrovertible evidence provided by the

[1] M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Caravan Cities*, translated by D. and T. Talbot Rice (Oxford 1932). An earlier version of this paper was the subject of the Fourth Annual W. Kendrick Pritchett Lecture at Berkeley, which I had the honour to give in April 1992, at a time when *The Roman Near East* was complete, but not yet published. I have kept the relatively informal style of a lecture, but have taken the opportunity to bring together various points scattered through *The Roman Near East*, to take account of a number of works published since the early 90's, and to add some new evidence, notably a recently published inscription from Palmyra on the dangers of the caravan trade. The paper also looks briefly at the question of whether we should give any credence to the idea that there was an established 'silk-road' through Central Asia. For an interesting recent review see R. Stoneman, *Palmyra and its Empire* (Ann Arbor 1992), ch.2: 'Of Spices, Silk and Camels'. Since I remain sceptical on this point, I await with some interest the publication of the *International Colloquium on Palmyra and the Silk Road*, held in Palmyra in 1992 (now published as *Ann. Arch. Ar. Syr.* 42 (1996)).

Abbreviations

CIS II.3 = *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* II. *Inscriptiones Aramaicas Continens* 3. *Inscriptiones Palmyrenae* (Paris 1926)

INV = J. Cantineau, *Inventaire des Inscriptions de Palmyre* I- (Beirut 1930-)

PAT = *D. R. Hillers and E. Cussini, Palmyrene Aramaic Texts* (Baltimore 1996)

[2] J. Teixidor, *Un Port Romain du Désert. Palmyre et son Commerce d'Auguste à Caracalla* (Semitica XXXIV, 1984); E. Will, *Les Palmyréniens. La Venise des Sables* (Paris 1992).

Periplus Maris Erythraei as regards long-distance trade by sea in the zone represented by the Red Sea, the east coast of Africa, the northern coasts of the Indian Ocean and the west coast of India. This highly evocative Greek text, written between AD 40 and 70, and excellently edited by Lionel Casson,[3] provides just what we do not know, or hardly know, of land-trade with Asia: the various different routes of exchange, the political relations involved, and above all detailed accounts of the objects of trade. But it does none the less serve to validate the starting-point of this essay, simply by confirming that long-distance trade, as an organised, conscious activity, was a feature of the society and economy of the Roman imperial period.

It would of course be very helpful if we had available any comparable work on trade by land. In fact we do not, though the *Parthian Stations* of Isidorus of Charax, apparently dating to around the turn of the eras, has sometimes been interpreted as if it were. Indeed in his invaluable edition and translation of 1914 W. H. Schoff sub-titled his book 'an account of the overland trade route between the Levant and India in the first century BC'.[4] As we will see, the work is indeed relevant for an understanding of trade-routes. But in reality the focus of interest of the author is not social or economic, but political and military. The work begins with the crossing of the Euphrates at Zeugma, in an easterly direction, and hence (implicitly) with entry into Parthian territory, and it ends with Alexandropolis, the metropolis of Arachosia: 'as far as this the land is under the rule of the Parthians' (*ἄχρὶ τοὐτου ἐστιν ἡ τῶν Πάρθων ἐπικράτεια*).

The itinerary traversed thus comes nowhere near India, ending instead where Parthian rule stopped in Central Asia. In between, the author's interest is focused on local political formations, and in particular on the question of whether a place was a Greek foundation, or counted as a Greek city. Hence we find here one of the very few literary references to Dura-Europos: 'next is Doura of Nicanor, a foundation of Macedonians, but (which) is called by the Greeks Europos'. Just before this, Isidorus has revealed what sort of travellers his work really concerns. Speaking of the confluence of the Chabur and the Euphrates, he says: 'from this point the forces (*στρατόπεδα*) cross over to the Roman side'. It is probable, though nowhere made explicit, that Isidorus is thinking of a Roman army invading, rather than of Parthian troops in transit. However, either interpretation is possible.

The first part of the itinerary involved has been excellently discussed recently by Chaumont and Gawlikowski;[5] this section went across the Euphrates, continued to the Balikh and then went down this river to the Euphrates, crossing over at the confluence with the Chabur, and continuing along the river as far as the King's Canal and the traverse across to Seleucia on the Tigris.

After that, the route took the traveller up through the Zagros Mountains to Media, Margiana and finally Alexandropolis. The terminal point is not India, but Alexandropolis, which, as is argued by Fraser in his recent study of Alexander's city-foundations, can be

[3] L. Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei. Text with Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Princeton 1989).

[4] Text of the *Σταθμοὶ Παρθικοί* in C. Müller, *Geographi Graeci Minores* I (Paris 1861), 244f.; Jacoby, *FGrH*, no.781; see esp. W. H. Schoff, *Parthian Stations of Isidorus of Charax. An Account of the Overland Trade between the Levant and India in the First Century BC* (Philadelphia 1914).

[5] M. L. Chaumont, 'Etudes d'Histoire Parthe. V. – La Route Royale des Parthes de Zeugma à Séleucie du Tigre d'après l'Itinéraire d'Isidore de Charax', *Syria* 61 (1984) 63-107; M. Gawlikowsky, 'La Route de l'Euphrate d'Isidore à Julien', in *Géographie Historique au Proche Orient (Syrie, Phénicie, Arabie, grecques, romaines, byzantines)*, ed. P. L. Gatier, B. Helly, J.-P. Rey-Coquais (Paris 1988), 77-98.

identified with Kandahar in Afghanistan.[6] It should be stressed also, however, that this city equally does not lie on any supposed line of a 'Silk Road' carrying trade between the Mediterranean area and China; on any reconstruction such a route would have run well to the north.[7]

The *Parthian Stations*, in short, is not in any simple sense evidence about trade-routes at all, still less about the legendary Silk Road. Whether there is indeed evidence for any such route will be touched on briefly later. For the problem of the possible role of cities lying in the Roman provinces, it is enough for the moment to take the hint that any traveller going eastwards might first travel south-eastwards, to the area where the Euphrates and Tigris come closest. In which direction trade then typically ran, whether north-eastwards to Media, or further south-eastwards to the head of the Gulf, remains to be discussed.

The absence of any true parallel to the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, giving an account of long-distance land trade, is a serious handicap. Any such account would have been invaluable, whether it concerned the northern crossing of the Euphrates at Zeugma, or that further south via Beroea and Hierapolis, or that traversing the Syrian steppe to Palmyra and then to the Euphrates; or possibly, much further south, that from Bostra via the Wadi Sirhan to Dumatha and then the Gulf, or that from Gaza or Petra to the Hedjaz and south to the Yemen. As we will see, there is some explicit evidence, from a variety of sources, for all these routes. But between them these scattered allusions still leave two enormous problems. Firstly – unlike the *Periplus* – they say extraordinarily little about what was actually carried, and what the objects of long-distance trade were. Secondly, they leave open the question of the importance of long-distance trade in the life of any of the cities concerned: were any of them in fact caravan cities?

If the answer is difficult everywhere else, surely it ought at least to be easy in the case of Palmyra, lying away out in the steppe between Emesa or Damascus and the Euphrates. Its position seems to mean that we have no option but to conceive of it as a caravan city. As we will see, Appian, writing in the middle of the second century, duly ascribes to it a central role in the trade between the Roman and Parthian Empires. But, quite apart from that, we have a long series of inscriptions – local documents from Palmyra and its region, in Greek and Palmyrene (a dialect of Aramaic) – which refer to the caravan trade. These inscriptions stretch from AD 19 to the 260's. What more do we want? In fact we have some more, namely the vast tax-law of AD 137, also inscribed in Greek and Palmyrene, and giving details of the tolls on goods coming into the city. But both of these bodies of evidence prove, when looked at more closely, to be somewhat deceptive.

There is a wider problem, however, indeed what seems to be a profound contradiction between what ancient sources suggest, and what modern theory dictates. By 'modern theory' I mean above all Moses Finley's *The Ancient Economy*.[8] The lessons of this book, as need hardly be said, were profound. To summarise grossly, Finley argued that neither trade as an activity nor traders as a class ever represented a dominant factor in the life of any ancient

[6] P. M. Fraser, *Cities of Alexander the Great* (Oxford 1996) 132-40.

[7] For maps of possible routes of the 'Silk Road', see eg. H. W. Haussig, *Die Geschichte Zentralasiens und der Seidenstrasse in Vorislamischer Zeit* (Darmstadt 1983) end-maps; R. Stoneman, *Palmyra and its Empire* 41. See also n.60 below.

[8] M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*[2] (London 1985).

community. A political community might regulate trade, protect it or tax it: it might also seek access to raw materials, or supplies, especially grain. But it did not have the promotion of its own trade – the search for markets for the products of its economy – as an objective. Trade was, to use an over-used phrase once again, 'embedded' in a wider political structure.

One very problematic side-effect of the presentation of this sweeping hypothesis – which is in broad terms correct – was an anti-empirical tendency, that is a disposition to take any one item of evidence, especially archaeological evidence demonstrating the movement of goods, and then reject it as not proving enough. By rejecting each item separately, Finley did come rather close to guaranteeing the impregnability of his main hypothesis. For if no item of concrete evidence were allowed to mean much, no accumulation of unexpected or unfamiliar items of empirical evidence could ever occur. Consequently, one could never be led by the accumulation of empirical evidence into revising one's initial hypothesis.

In the course of talking about the 'ancient economy', by which he meant the economic characteristics of the Graeco-Roman world, Finley did not say a great deal about the eastern trade of the Roman Empire. It is significant that the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* is never referred to. When trade with Asia is mentioned, it is in sweeping terms (p. 34):

> To be meaningful, 'world market', 'a single economic unit' must embrace something considerably more than the exchange of some goods over long distances; otherwise China, Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula and India were also part of the same unit and world market. One must show the existence of interlocking behaviours and responses over wide areas...

Certainly, if only some notion of a 'world market' or 'single economic unit' will allow us to attribute any importance to long-distance trade, we shall have to give up at once. For, given the restricted means of transport, and the non-existence of credit-transfer systems, operating at a distance, without cash, it is inconceivable that long-distance trade could have had, overall, anything like the importance which would have produced world-wide rhythms of boom or recession of the sort familiar to-day. But that is hardly a reasonable requirement. What we need to ask is two more modest questions. Firstly did people perceive long-distance trade with the east as an important phenomenon? Even Finley could not properly deny that this would be a significant question: for on the very same page he states that his justification for speaking of 'the ancient economy' lies in its 'common cultural-psychological framework' – or in other words (to put it crudely) what people say in those ancient texts which happen to have survived. Secondly, long-distance trade, whose actual existence cannot possibly be denied, might have been sufficiently important to give a different character to certain places: in short to have produced, exceptionally, some 'caravan cities'. Oddly enough, the *Ancient Economy* makes only one passing allusion to Palmyra, and then brushes it aside as an exception: 'exceptional cities, such as ... the caravan-city of Palmyra'(p.59). But in fact, as will be seen, Palmyra conformed rather better to his own model than he himself recognised.

If one is going to reject an approach based on the accumulation and analysis of concrete items of evidence, and look instead for a 'common cultural-psychological framework' one must then take seriously what the ancient sources say. For what they (along with epigraphic evidence and iconography) say is our means of access to 'the common cultural-psychological framework'. But Finley wants, indeed needs, to have it both ways. Take for instance what he

says about the two passages of Pliny the Elder which reflect concern about the expense of Roman trade with the East (p. 132):

> The famous passages in the elder Pliny (*Natural History* 6.101; 12.84) giving dubious figures of the drain of Roman gold and silver to India and other eastern countries in payment for luxuries are moral in their implication.

But, firstly, moral concerns are part of the 'cultural-psychological framework'; and, secondly, moralising implications do not automatically deprive reports of all factual content. What does Pliny the Elder, writing in the 70's of the first century, actually say?

The first passage (*NH* VI. 26/101) refers, like the *Periplus*, to the sea-trade between Egypt and India. Each year, Pliny says, no less than 50 million sesterces was drained off by India, which sent back goods sold at 100 times their original value. The focus of the second passage (*NH* XII. 41/84) is the same: the luxury trade with India, China and the Arabian peninsula cost not less than 100 million sesterces per year. There is simply no way of knowing whether the figures are 'dubious' or not. Both passages are indeed alarmist, or moralising: but neither in fact mentions anything about gold or silver, each giving the alleged values in terms of sesterces. None the less we cannot simply brush them aside. However curious its concerns may seem to us, Pliny's *Natural History* is the most intense exploration of man's relation to his physical environment, in the widest sense, known to us from Antiquity.[9] If he expresses concern about the cost of luxury-trade with the east then the existence of this luxury trade was known in Rome – it was not in other words a merely local phenomenon – and it was felt to be an issue of some importance.

It may none the less be significant that in Pliny's eyes it was the sea-trade which was the significant factor. It is surely striking than when he first refers to Palmyra he emphasises the richness of its soil and its water supply, and (rather misleadingly) its position as balancing politically between the Parthian and Roman Empires (*NH* V, 21/88); in fact – as has long been clear – it had been firmly in the Roman sphere at least since the reign of Tiberius. Pliny does go on immediately to give the distances from Palmyra: 337 Roman miles to Seleucia 'of the Parthians', 203 to the nearest point on the Syrian coast (a significant point, as we will see below), and 23 less than that to Damascus (which raises the question of whether Damascus was in any sense a caravan city). In fact however, even in this context, Pliny makes no reference to trade.

The question of how ancient writers speak about long-distance trade remains, however inadequate their accounts are, of central importance. To review what we know, I would like to begin in the south, with routes through Arabia, then go to the north, to the Fertile Crescent and Mesopotamia; and finally come to the only area which presents a mass of local, documentary evidence, namely Palmyra and the Euphrates.

There is a good reason for beginning in the extreme south, for it is here that Pliny gives the most concrete and detailed available account of any long-distance trade-route by land. What Pliny is describing is a route running north along the east side of the Red Sea, starting from

[9] For Pliny see the excellent study by M. Beagon, *Roman Nature: The Thought of Pliny the Elder* (Oxford 1992).

Thomna (or Thumna) in the territory of the Gebbanitae (present-day Yemen) and going all the way to Gaza on the Mediterranean coast. This is what he says:[10]

> It (*sc.* frankincense – *tus*) can only be exported through the country of the Gebbanitae, and accordingly a tax is paid on it to the king of that people as well. Their capital is Thomna, which is 1487½ miles distant from the town of Gaza in Judaea on the Mediterranean coast; the journey is divided into 65 stages with halts for camels. Fixed portions of the frankincense are also given to the priests and the king's secretaries, but beside these the guards and their attendants and the gate-keepers and servants also have their pickings: indeed all along the route they keep on paying, at one place for water, at another for fodder, or the charges for lodging at the halts, and the various tolls; so that expenses mount up to 688 *denarii* per camel before the Mediterranean coast is reached; and then again payment is made to the customs officers of our Empire.

Pliny is being quite up to date, for Gaza had probably become a part of the province of Judaea only after the Jewish war, which had ended in 70.[11] What he says about the total distances is in truth unreliable, for the manuscripts vary. But we know the distance, as the crow flies, anyway: it is approximately 1300 miles. If Pliny has indicated the number of stages correctly, each of the 65 stages will have covered on average 20 miles, not allowing for deviations.

What is crucial is the indication that the goods were carried on camels, and that successive tolls and charges had to be paid en route, and finally to the Roman *publicani* at Gaza. Unfortunately Pliny does not give an estimate of the original value of each load in *denarii*.

It is a great pity that Pliny also fails to indicate that the latter stages of this route, before it reached Gaza, will have passed through the territory of the kingdom of Nabataea. But we know that it must have done so, until that area became in 106 the Roman province of 'Arabia'. For the regal period, at any rate, we can fill in the picture from the description in Strabo's *Geography*, written under Augustus and Tiberius. According to him there was a regular trade-route from Petra to Leuke Kome, at the mouth of the gulf of Aqaba, 'to which and from which camel-traders travel safely and easily on the route from and to Petra, in such numbers of men and camels as to differ in no way from an army.'[12] Strabo is in fact touching here on a different aspect of the movement of trade, namely that which came by sea up the Red Sea as far as Leuke Kome, where goods were landed and taken up to Petra. Hence the *Periplus* mentions Leuke Kome 'through which there is a way inland up to Petra, to Malichus, king of the Nabataeans. This harbour also serves in a way the function of a port of trade for the craft, none large, that come to it loaded with freight from Arabia. For that reason, as a safeguard there is dispatched for duty in it a customs officer to deal with the (duty of a) fourth on incoming merchandise, as well as a centurion with a detachment of soldiers.'[13] In spite of much argument, it can be taken as certain that the 'centurion' was in fact a Nabataean officer, and the king was Malchus II, who reigned from AD 40 to 70. Here,

[10] *NH* XII. 32 / 63-5, Loeb trans.

[11] F. Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC – AD 337* (Harvard 1993) 90-91.

[12] Strabo, *Geog.* XVI.4.23 (781).

[13] *Periplus* 19, trans. Casson.

also, for the first time, we have a description of a regular 'caravan'. Ships still came up this route three centuries later, perhaps indeed even further up, to Aqaba or Elat at the head of the Gulf, the ancient Aela. Eusebius identifies this place as 'lying next to the Red Sea, sailed by those coming from Egypt and those from India.'[14]

From Leuke Kome, caravans will clearly have travelled up the east side of the Gulf of Aqaba; from Aela onwards they could either go up what was later (after the Roman absorption of the area in 106) to be the Via Nova Traiana running north-eastwards to Petra and beyond; or perhaps they may have diverged almost due north, to reach the Mediterranean at Gaza. In fact it is perhaps more likely that even goods eventually bound for Gaza normally went through Petra, avoiding the more mountainous parts of northern Sinai; if so, the route will then have crossed the Wadi Arabah westwards, and then traversed the Negev. At any rate Strabo briefly describes the nature of the route of 260 *stadia* between Aela and Gaza: over desert and sandy regions, and traversed (once again) by camels.[15] Elsewhere he indicates a slightly different route for goods landed at Leuke Kome: from there to Petra and then across to Rhinocoloura (on the coast south-west from Gaza).[16]

Gaza seems to have played the major role as the post through which high-value goods, such as frankincense, finally reached the Mediterranean. Roman *publicani* were thus stationed there in the later first century, as we know from Pliny.[17]

Strabo does indeed imply, in the last passage quoted, that much of the sea-trade from the Indian Ocean had already shifted to Egypt, which is likely to be true, and to have remained so throughout the empire. But what needs to be stressed is that there was a series of land-routes, or combined land-and-sea-routes, from the east to the Mediterranean. If we were looking for 'caravan cities' we might be in danger of finding too many. So, for instance, Strabo also implies that in the area of Damascus there were robbers based on Trachonitis – that extraordinary broken lava-field which lies like a pancake on the plain between Damascus and the Hauran – and that, until repressed in the later 20's BC, they would raid traders (*emporoi*) coming from Arabia Felix.[18] If that is true, it must mean that some traders, coming either by land or sea from the Yemen, continued north from Petra, presumably along the line of the later Via Nova Traiana, past the Decapolis region to Bostra, and on to Damascus. If so, not two but perhaps three trade routes may have met at Damascus: namely that just implied, from the south; the road westwards over Anti-Lebanon, into the Beqa' valley and over Mt Lebanon to the coast at Berytus; and that running north-eastwards along the line of the later 'Strata Diocletiana', to Palmyra and beyond.[19] Thus Damascus also might hypothetically count as a 'caravan city'.[20] The evidence for this, as is obvious, is however

[14] Eusebius, *Onomastikon*, ed. Klostermann, p.6.

[15] *Geog.* XVI.2.30 (759).

[16] *Geog.* XVI.4.24 (781).

[17] See C. A. M. Glucker, *The City of Gaza in the Roman and Byzantine Periods* (BAR International Series 325, 1987) 86-93.

[18] *Geog.* XVI.2.20 (756).

[19] See p. 134 below.

[20] For a survey of the urban history of Damascus in antiquity, not considering possible trade-communications, see E. Will, 'Damas antique', *Syria* 71 (1994) 1-43.

extremely slight, and far more significance attaches to the extensive cultivable zone which surrounds it.[21]

In recent years indeed, it has been supposed – on extremely slight evidence – that the economic centre of the Nabataean kingdom under its last king, Rabbel II (70-106), shifted to the north, to Bostra.[22] There is really no good evidence for this. But one thing which has suggested it is the evidence – very slight but real – for a Nabataean and then a Roman presence far down the Wadi Sirhan to the south-east, namely at Duma or Dumatha. This is present-day al-Jawf, some 500 kilometres from Bostra, where there are both Nabataean and Roman graffiti.[23] Was there a trade-route through here? If there were, it would have involved a journey of the 500 kilometres from the nearest Greek cities, Philadelphia or Bostra, and then nearly another 500 to the nearest point on the Euphrates, before the descent to the Gulf. It is not impossible: the route in 65 stages from Thomna to Gaza was longer. Moreover, here too, Pliny the Elder does describe such a route, even if his ideas on distance are completely confused: he does however seem to imply that one could travel from Petra via Dumatha to the river-systems of lower Mesopotamia.[24] His conceptions are vague, to say the least. But we know that Dumatha was within the Nabataean-Roman sphere of influence; and there can hardly have been much point in going there except to continue to the head of the Gulf.

The trade-route to the East which has always attracted the most attention is of course that through Palmyra to the Euphrates. But before we come to that area, let us look further north. For in the nature of the case, except in special conditions, the existence of the Fertile Crescent meant that most traffic aiming for any point in the central Asian land-mass would leave the Mediterranean coast in northern Syria, the area which had been suddenly urbanised by Seleucus I around the year 300 BC: here there were the ports of Seleucia and Laodicea, and the inland cities of Antiochia and Apamea, further up the Orontes; and further inland and to the north Cyrrhus (now just on the Syrian side of the Turkish border), and to its south Beroea (Aleppo), centred on its magnificent natural acropolis. These two places in fact defined the two main ways by which one might continue from Antiochia to cross the Euphrates: either north-east through Cyrrhus to another Seleucia, usually known as Zeugma, 'the bridge', and then into Mesopotamia, to reach Edessa; or on eastwards through Beroea, watered by the river Belus, and then north-eastwards to Hierapolis, before crossing the river. Here again, we have crucial evidence from Strabo, though he in fact fails to understand the point of his own description of where travellers went after they crossed the Euphrates. He seems to be thinking of the more southerly crossing near Hierapolis; but the essential point which he makes is that after crossing the Euphrates travellers continued into the desert, and then kept the river (the Euphrates) on their right for a three-day journey. The reason which he gives is extremely important for understanding not only this route but also that through

[21] See most recently M. Dodinet, J. Leblanc, J.-P. Vallat and F. Villeneuve, 'Le Paysage Antique en Syrie: l'exemple de Damas', *Syria* 67 (1990) 339-54.

[22] See M. Sartre, *Bostra. Des Origines à l'Islam* (Paris 1985) 54-56; Millar, *Roman Near East* (see n.11 above), 408.

[23] For Dumatha, see Millar, *Roman Near East* (see n.11 above), 392.

[24] Pliny *NH* VI.32/146: 'quidam et alia duo oppida longis intervallis Tigri praenavigari tradunt, Barbatiam, mox Dumatham, quod abesse a Petra dierum x navigatione'. It should be clear enough that Pliny is totally confused about spatial relationships in this area. See however D. T. Potts, 'Trans-Arabian Routes of the Pre-Islamic Period' in *L'Arabie et ses Mers Bordières* I. *Itinéraires et Voyages*, ed. J.-F. Salles (Paris 1988), 127-62.

Palmyra: that is that the chiefs of the tent-dwellers (*Skenitai*) living further from the river were more moderate in the payments they asked for, and were more helpful in providing watering-places for the camels.[25] The ambivalent relationship between traveller and local community thus surfaces once again, as it does also on the route between the Yemen and Gaza.

Strabo does also mention the other crucial factor: namely the two tributaries of the Euphrates which rise in the Mesopotamian shelf, the Balikh and the Chabur. But he does not relate them to the route taken. This vital item is supplied by Strabo's contemporary, Isidorus of Charax. The point comes from his brief but priceless itinerary of how one journeyed through Parthian territory, the *Parthian Stations*, discussed above. He describes the more northerly route, from the Euphrates at Zeugma, and from there across to the river Balikh; and then down the Balikh to its confluence with the Euphrates at Nikephorion. Then the route went down the Euphrates past its confluence with the Chabur; and then, as we saw earlier, it took the traveller back onto the right bank, past Dura and on down the river as far as the royal canal, where one crossed over to Seleucia on the Tigris.

The fact that both of these two northern routes – that through Zeugma and that through Hierapolis – were well established in the late first century BC is important. For there is a danger of reading our scattered literary references as if they added up to a consistent story – that is a shift away both from trade through Nabataea and through Palmyra in favour of a northern route through the Fertile Crescent. But, firstly, the northern route itself – or at least one variant of it – in fact turned south as soon as it reached the Balikh; and, secondly, for the traveller there was always a choice at that point. We can see this in the wonderful account of this area as it was in the fourth century contained in the *History* of Ammianus. Two sections are of particular importance. The first is the famous account of the fair at Batnae, or Anthemusia, which lay near the more northerly route between the Euphrates at Zeugma and the headwaters of the Balikh:[26]

> The town of Batnae, founded in Anthemusia in early times by a band of Macedonians, is separated by a short space from the river Euphrates; it is filled with wealthy traders when, at the yearly festival, near the beginning of the month of September, a great crowd of every condition gathers for the fair, to traffic in the wares sent from India and China, and in other articles that are regularly brought there in great abundance by land and sea.

Is the reference to 'the Chinese' (*Seres*) an allusion to a 'silk-road' running through the Asian land-mass? That is certainly possible. But there is also a reference here to 'the Indians', and to goods coming by sea as well as by land. What this means is explained when Ammianus describes Julian's last expedition, on which his army marched out in 363, from Antioch through Beroea (Aleppo) and Hierapolis (hence by the more southerly route), and then to the Euphrates. From there he crossed over to Batnae, thus apparently travelling north-eastwards to join the more northerly route, and from there continued to Carrhae, the ancient Harran:[27]

[25] *Geog.* XVI.1.27 (748).

[26] Ammianus XVI.3.3, Loeb trans.

[27] Ammianus XXIII.2.3-3.1, Loeb trans.

> From there two different royal highways lead to Persia: the one on the left through Adiabene and over the Tigris; the other, on the right, through Assyria and across the Euphrates.

Julian then pretended to march towards the Tigris, but in fact followed the other route, indeed exactly that traced in the *Parthian Stations*: that is to say down the Balikh to Callinicum on the Euphrates; on to the confluence of the Chabur and the Euphrates, where Diocletian had established the fortress of Circesium; then past the now deserted town of Dura; and then further south to the King's Canal, Seleucia and Ctesiphon.

These two alternative ways of starting from Syria therefore represented variants on an established means of reaching northern Mesopotamia. The central feature of both was the step of avoiding the long curve of the Euphrates by crossing to the headwaters of the Balikh on the Mesopotamian shelf, before turning south to travel down the Balikh to the Euphrates. In the fourth century this area was now Roman territory; but conversely the Euphrates below the Chabur, including the deserted town of Dura, which had been in Roman hands from the 160's to the 250's, was now Persian.

From the lower Euphrates, or from Ctesiphon on the Tigris, one could travel down either river to the shores of the Gulf, and take ship for India. It was on that shore, as a famous story in Cassius Dio records, that Trajan – the only Roman Emperor ever to reach the Gulf – had stood and watched a merchantman setting off for India. If only he had been as young as Alexander![28] The merchants were still there in (probably) the third century, when the 'Hymn of the Pearl' included in Syriac *Acts of Thomas* describes it as 'the meeting-place of the merchants of the East'.[29] There is no reason to think that this later ceased to be so.

There are two reasons why it has been supposed that the main trade-routes shifted northwards in the course of the Imperial period. One is the history of Palmyra, to which we will come. The other is the treaty which Diocletian made, after conquering the upper Tigris region, in 298 or 299. One provision in the treaty was that Nisibis, situated in eastern Mesopotamia not far from the Tigris, should be the only place of *synallagmata*.[30] The term should perhaps mean 'contracts' or 'agreements' rather than specifically 'exchanges of goods'. In any case, as we have seen, goods sent from India and China were certainly being traded at Batnae, further west than Nisibis, in the 350's. Similarly, that splendid geographical text of the mid-fourth century, the *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, describes how wealth was gained from trade with Persia both by Nisibis but also by another city which may be either Amida, further up the Tigris, or less probably Edessa: 'for, receiving goods from the Persians, they sell them throughout the whole territory of the Romans'.[31] But in any case the precise pattern of these exchanges will have been altered profoundly when Jovian in 363, after Julian's death, had to cede Nisibis, Singara and five districts along the Tigris to the

[28] Dio LXVIII.29.1.

[29] A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas. Introduction – Text – Commentary* (Leiden 1962), trans. of 109.18 (p.121).

[30] Petrus Patricius, Fr.14 (*FHG* IV, p.189). See Millar, *Roman Near East* (see n.11 above), 178.

[31] J. Rougé, *Expositio totius mundi et gentium. Introduction, texte critique, traduction, notes et commentaire* (Sources Chrétiennes 124, Paris 1966). 22: 'Sunt ergo Nisibis et *Edessa*, quae in omnibus viros habent optimos et in negotio valde acutos et bene venantes. Praecipue et divites et omnibus bonis ornati sunt: accipientes enim a Persis ipsi in omnem terram Romanorum vendentes et ementes iterum tradunt, extra aeramen et ferrum'. Since Edessa is mentioned separately at the end of the same paragraph, it does not seem that it can have been named in the first phrase quoted.

Persians. Moreover, we do not know what routes trade had followed beyond Nisibis. Directly to China along the 'silk route' through Central Asia? Or down the Tigris to Babylonia and the Gulf? In 363, after Julian's death, Jovian had in fact brought his forces back up the east side of the Tigris, and then across to Hatra in the Mesopotamian steppe, and on to Nisibis. The two possibilities are not of course mutually exclusive. What is certain is firstly that this northern route, at least as far as the cities of the Mesopotamian shelf, was in use throughout the Roman imperial period. Secondly, it seems clear that camel-trains were in use here too. One of the great discoveries of the last few years has been the new archive of papyri of the 230's to 250's which comes from the middle Euphrates, and includes items in Greek, Syriac or both. One of them, of about 240, shows a man from Beth Phouraia, near the confluence of the Chabur and the Euphrates, advising his son on the hire of camels for the journey from Beroea (Aleppo) to Zeugma.[32] The 'caravan', if that is what it was, will thus having been going from the southern route to the Euphrates to the northern one – but where next, is not made clear. Thirdly, all the routes concerned were exposed to attacks from the nomads whom Graeco-Roman writers called 'Skenitai' ('tent-dwellers') or 'Arabes' or (from the second century onwards) 'Sarakenoi' or 'Saracens'. A succession of 'Saracen' kings, for instance, came to join Julian on his expedition into Persia.[33] But our most vivid impression comes from Jerome, in the *Life* of Malchus. The story is set before 363, when Nisibis was lost to the Persians. Malchus was journeying eastwards from near Chalcis, on the edge of the Syrian steppe south of Beroea, to see his parents who lived near Nisibis. But along the road the 'company', deliberately travelling together for protection, were attacked by 'Saracens', whom Jerome, as a Christian, also calls 'Ishmaelites'. Unfortunately Jerome does not make clear whether this episode is supposed to have taken place west or east of the Euphrates. At any rate the narrative is too vivid not to quote:[34]

> Lying near the public highway from Beroea to Edessa, there is a desert through which nomad Saracens are always wandering back and forth. For this reason, travellers along the way group together and, by mutual aid, decrease the danger of surprise attack. There were in my company men, women, old men, young people, children, numbering in all about seventy. Suddenly, Ishmaelites, riding upon horses and camels, descended upon us in a startling attack, with their long hair flying from under their head-bands.

The group whom Malchus had joined had clearly gathered for protection. He uses for them the word *comitatus*, which could properly be translated 'caravan'.

We therefore come to the same conclusion as before. As places from which groups of travellers set off across the margins of the steppe, exposed to attacks from nomads, or at least to the exaction of tolls by them, Antiochia, Beroea and Hierapolis in Syria; Zeugma on the Euphrates; and Batnae, Edessa and Nisibis in Mesopotamia might all be seen, potentially, as 'caravan cities'. The facts of geography, and above all of the availability of water, must

[32] D. Feissel, J. Gascou, 'Documents d'archives romains inédits du Moyen Euphrate (III[e] siècle après J.-C.)', *CRAI* 1989, 533-61, no.16 (description only); H. M. Cotton, W. E. H. Cockle, F. G. B. Millar, 'The Papyrology of the Roman Near East: a Survey', *JRS* 85 (1995) 214-35, no.33.

[33] See Ammianus XXIII.3.8; XXIV.1.10; 2.4. cf. XIV.4.

[34] Jerome, *V. Malchi* 4 (*PL* XXIII, cols. 55-62). Trans. by M. L. Ewald in *Early Christian Biographies* ed. R. J. Deferrari (Washington D.C. 1952), 281f.

always have meant that most traffic from the coastal area of the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia, Babylonia or Central Asia travelled along the Fertile Crescent.

All this has been necessary to put what we know of Palmyra in proper context. In this case we are talking about a very different geographical context. But it was not wholly different. It was not only, as Pliny knew (p. 123 above), that Palmyra was a well-watered oasis. It was also that it owed the existence of that oasis to its position under a chain of quite high mountains which stretches out north-eastwards from the major mountain of Anti-Lebanon above Damascus. In the mountainous, and not entirely arid, zone north-west of Palmyra there was an extensive area of villages with small temples and Palmyrene inscriptions, brilliantly studied by Daniel Schlumberger.[35] The limit of the zone of 200 millimetres rainfall comes quite close to Palmyra, whose date-palms still benefit also from a natural spring.

Palmyra was certainly not, however, the centre of a rich, fertile countryside like that around Gerasa, which there is indeed no reason to think of as a 'caravan-city' at all. But, equally, it was also, like any other Graeco-Roman city, the 'central place' of an agricultural hinterland, as well as having, like Damascus, a rich oasis immediately round it. It is these circumstances which explain why, whatever is going to cast light on the long-distance 'caravan' trade of Palmyra (which was a reality), it is not the famous customs-law. For, as John Matthews showed, this law in fact deals with products coming into the city from its immediate hinterland.[36] Indeed it is not, strictly speaking, only a customs-law, since traders, including prostitutes, are also taxed; it is in fact a law on the indirect taxes which Palmyra, like any other city in the Empire, was entitled to raise. But the text does refer to loads brought in by camel or donkey; to animals coming in for slaughter; to bronze statues being imported; to the sale of salt; and to sheep being brought in, either for grazing or to be sheared. Almost nothing in the law suggests long-distance trade in luxuries; indeed the only item which might do so is the reference to camel- or donkey- loads of ointment, *μύρον*, namely 'myrrh'. An analysis of the tax-law thus produces a picture of economic movements and of the city's relationship to trade which could be true of any city. If Palmyra were indeed a 'caravan city' the tax-law does not reveal it.

I am not going to argue that there was no sense in which this is true of Palmyra. It does have to be admitted however that outsiders' references to Palmyra, and to its distinctive character as a city, are extraordinarily few. To the best of my knowledge not a single Graeco-Roman writer refers to the remarkable art and architecture of Palmyra, even though we know that it was visited by three Emperors, Hadrian, Severus Alexander and Aurelian. Nor does anyone allude to the fact that in Palmyra alone, of all the cities in the Empire, one could see a series of public inscriptions in both Greek and a Semitic language, in parallel, which lasted for almost three centuries. Josephus however does give us a vivid picture of Palmyra, which he supposed to have been founded by Solomon:[37]

> He (Solomon) advanced into the desert of Upper Syria and, having taken possession of it, founded there a very great city at a distance of two days' journey from Upper Syria and

[35] D. Schlumberger, *La Palmyrène du Nord-ouest* (Paris 1951).

[36] J. F. Matthews, 'The Tax Law of Palmyra: Evidence for Economic History in a City of the Roman East', *JRS* 74 (1984) 157-80.

[37] Josephus, *AJ* VIII.6.1 (153-4), Loeb trans.

> one day's journey from the Euphrates, while from the great Babylon the distance was a journey of six days. Now the reason for founding the city so far from the inhabited parts of Syria was that further down there was no water anywhere in the land and that only in this place were springs and wells to be found. And so, when he had built this city and surrounded it with very strong walls, he named it Thadamora, as it is still called by the Syrians, while the Greeks call it Palmyra.

Josephus' impressions of the distances are much too short: Palmyra will have been almost 8 days' journey from Antioch, and 6 days' from the Euphrates at Dura; the journey to Babylon will have taken something like another 12 days. But its role as a major watering-place on the route between Syria and Babylonia is clearly brought out.

Josephus, however, says nothing specifically about trade. Remarkably enough, the only ancient writer who does refer to the trade of Palmyra is Appian. Describing the attack on Palmyra by the forces of Marcus Antonius in 41 BC, Appian says, moving into the present tense, 'for being traders (*emporoi*) they bring goods from (the territory of) the Persians and dispose of them in that of the Romans.'[38] Though the urbanisation of Palmyra had already begun in the first century BC, what Appian says is evidence for his own time, the mid-second century. It should be stressed that we have no other external evidence for Palmyrene trade, and no internal literary evidence (there is no Palmyrene literature), nor anything more than scraps of Palmyrene documents on perishable materials.[39]

In short everything that we know about Palmyrene trade is a function of the Palmyrene version of the 'epigraphic habit'. What is unique about this habit is simply that it did remain bilingual, from the later first century BC to a few years after Aurelian's reconquest (ie to the late 270's). After that, it is essential to stress, Palmyra was not destroyed, but continued to exist as a minor Greek provincial city, with a Roman garrison.

The inscriptions which refer to Palmyrene trade stretch from AD 19 to the 260's.[40] The first thing to stress is that, as proper off-shoots of the Graeco-Roman 'epigraphic habit' the relevant inscriptions are all, without exception, honorific inscriptions for individuals. The earliest of them comes from AD 19, put up by Greek and Palmyrene merchants 'in Seleucia (BSLWKY' in the Palmyrene text, in fact the only reference to Seleucia in the epigraphy of Palmyra).[41] The next is of AD 24, put up to honour Malichos son of Nesa by 'the merchants who are in Babylon, because he benefited them in all ways.'[42] The series continues to the 260's, with a marked concentration in the earlier second century. The latest firmly dated one is of 257/8, and is put up by the *boule* and *demos* (of what was now a Roman *colonia*) to honour Iulius Aurelius Salamallathus, an *archemporos*, for having 'brought back' a caravan (*synodia*) 'without charging, at his own expense'.[43] The second thing to note is that all the

[38] Appian, *BC* V 9/37-38.

[39] For the known fragments, from Palmyra itself and Dura, see Cotton, Cockle, Millar (*op.cit.* in n.32), nos. 2; 153; the latter is listed also as *PAT*, no.152.

[40] All the known inscriptions relating to Palmyrene trade are conveniently listed by M. Gawlikowski, 'Palmyra as a trading centre', *Iraq* 56 (1994) 27-33, on pp.32-3. Those referred to in this paper will have their numbers in *PAT* added.

[41] *CIS* II.3, no.3924 = *Inv.* IX, no.6A = *PAT*, no.0270.

[42] *CIS* II.3, no.3915 = *Inv.* IX, no.11 = *PAT*, no.1352.

[43] *CIS* II.3, no.3936 = *Inv.* IV, no.13 = *PAT*, no.0282.

places mentioned in the inscriptions lie to the East of Palmyra: the city of Seleucia on the Tigris is mentioned, as we have just seen, only once, on a fragmentary inscription of AD 19. Otherwise we have references to Vologaesias, somewhere on the Euphrates, to Mesene at the head of the Persian Gulf and, very significantly to 'Scythia'. We know what they will have meant by 'Scythia', because the *Periplus* (38) also refers to this area – it was north-west India. So, for instance, one of the many inscriptions of the mid-second century in honour of M. Ulpius Iaraios, or Yarhai, was put up 'by the merchants who have returned from Scythia in the ship of Onainos son of Addoudanos', because of the assistance which he had given them.[44]

Palmyrene traders, it is quite clear, regularly travelled across the steppe to the Euphrates, either directly to Dura, or on the route south-westwards to Hit (Aeipolis). The long track across the steppe is still visible from the air. They might go as far down the river as Vologaesias, whose exact location on the Euphrates is not known, or on to Spasinou Charax (Mesene), which is mentioned several times in the inscriptions from the second century. But they might also take ship to north-west India. Strictly speaking there is no Palmyrene evidence to show that they ever took the route north-eastwards into Central Asia, starting from Seleucia and crossing the Zagros Mountains, which Isidorus' *Parthian Stations* indicates (pp. 120, 127-28 above). As Gawlikowski has made clear, the Palmyrene trade-route reflected in the inscriptions runs, without exception, south-eastwards towards the head of the Gulf: 'There is strictly nothing to suggest that the Palmyrenes were interested in the land route through Iran and Central Asia, the celebrated Silk Road'.[45]

There did seem at one moment to be real archaeological evidence for a Palmyrene presence on the Silk Road, in the form of two Palmyrene *stelai* found at Merv in present-day Turkmenistan; but unfortunately it now seems clear that they were brought there in the nineteenth century.[46]

What we can know from the honorific inscriptions is confined – obviously enough – to what they will tell us. Firstly, there were indeed 'caravans' – *synodiai*. Their members are called in Palmyrene BNY ŠYRT' ('sons of the caravan'). Secondly, these caravans required protection against the peoples living in the steppe. The protection involved might simply be financial, in other words the payment of something between tolls and protection-money (compare Pliny's account of the route through the Hedjaz, and Strabo's of the Euphrates route, pp. 123-24 and 124-25 above). We have seen how Salamallathos in 257 brought back a *synodia* 'at no cost', 'at his own expense'. But on other occasions real fighting was involved. In 199 Ogelos son of Makkaios is honoured 'for his having given satisfaction through continued commands (*strategiai*) against the *nomades*, and having provided safety for the merchants (*emporoi*) and the caravans (*synodiai*) in all his commands of caravans

[44] *Inv.* X, no.96 = *PAT*, no.1405.

[45] Gawlikowski, *op.cit.* (n.40) 29.

[46] For the evidence and references see K. Parlasca, 'Auswärtige Beziehungen Palmyras im Lichte archäologischer Funde', *Dam. Mitt.* 6 (1992) 257-65, on 258.

(*synodiarchai*)'.[47] We know that the Palmyrenes, uniquely for a provincial city, maintained military outposts far away on the Euphrates, outside the Roman provincial area.[48]

Our knowledge of the difficulties and dangers which faced caravans on their way back from Vologaesias to Palmyra has been enhanced recently by a newly-published bilingual inscription of AD 144 from the temple of Athena, honouring Soados son of Boliades (to use his Greek name). He had saved a caravan under attack from forces under a leader called in Palmyrene 'Abdallat Ahiitya, and the allusion here seems to be quite clearly to military protection. Since the preliminary publication appears in an article by H. J. W. Drijvers on the dependence of the public vocabulary of Palmyrene on Greek,[49] and might thus escape notice altogether, it is worth reproducing Drijvers' translation here, with minor presentational changes:

> [The statues?], this one in [the temple of Athen]a, one in the sacred garden, and one in the temple of Atargatis, [which] have been erected next to the first four statues that were erected by the first caravan (*synodia*) for Soados son of Boliades son of Thaimisamsos, who is pious and patriotic, through his benevolence and magnanimity towards the citizens in every way, adorned with distinctions and very great honours, the caravan (*synodia*) of all Palmyrenes which came back from Vologaesias erected, because he advanced in a distinguished manner, taking with him a large force, and he protected (them) against [Ab]dallathos from Eeithe and those ('the robbers' in the Palmyrene text) that were brought together by him from P[.....] who for a long time were lying in wait in order to harm the [caravan...] he preserved them. Therefore they erected for him [the statues?] to honour him, when Malê son of Sumonos [.....] and [E]nnibel son of Sumonos son of Bazekes were caravan-leaders (*συνοδιαρχούντων*) in the year 455 month Daisius (June).

The Abdallathos against whom Soados had protected the caravan will presumably have been very like the *phylarchoi* of the Skenitai of whom Strabo speaks as operating on the other side of the Euphrates (pp. 126-27 above). This seems to be the only occasion on which one of them is mentioned by name in the epigraphy of Palmyra.

We should not minimise what we can learn from these inscriptions, limited as they are in their formal character. *Synodiai*, 'caravans', were indeed a regular feature of trade. There was a public position called 'synodiarchos' and another called 'archemporos' ('leading merchant'). These caravans travelled across the steppe to and from Vologaesias and Spasinou Charax. Some Palmyrene merchants ventured further, across the Indian ocean. Protection against the dangers of the land-route was necessary, and was supplied either by money, or by actual fighting against the *nomades*.

But we learn nothing of the internal organisation of a *synodia*; nothing whatsoever of the objects of trade; nothing directly about the forms of transport, presumably camels or donkeys; and above all we hear nothing of how, or in what direction, this trade was then

[47] *Inv.* X, no.44 = *PAT*, no. 1378.

[48] See M. Gawlikowski, 'Palmyra et l'Euphrate', *Syria* 60 (1983) 53-68; Millar, *Roman Near East* (see n.11 above), 115, 133-34.

[49] H. J. W. Drijvers, 'Greek and Aramaic in Palmyrene Inscriptions', in *Studia Aramaica: New Sources and New Approaches*, ed. M. J. Geller and J. C. Greenfield (Oxford 1995), 31-42, on 33-39, with Pl. 2. Not included in *PAT*.

carried westwards – that is of how, in Appian's words, the Palmyrenes disposed of the goods in the empire of the Romans (p. 131 above).

What this means is that what the inscriptions will tell us is determined by their political, and to an extent military preoccupations: the benefits which the *euergetai* who were honoured conferred related to the no-mans-land of the steppe between Palmyra and the Euphrates, and between the Roman and the Parthian, and then the Persian, empires. The routes to the west, towards the coast, will have been relatively secure. One certainly led south-eastwards to Damascus; by the end of the third century this route had an imperial name, the 'Strata Diocletiana', and was lined with Roman forts.[50] Anything which reached the Mediterranean from there will have been carried through the pass over Anti-Lebanon into the Beqa' Valley and then over Mt Lebanon to Berytus. Much more direct was the route westwards to Emesa (Homs), or Laodicea ad Libanum, and then through the Homs gap to the sea. When traffic reached the sea, the obvious ports were the old Phoenician cities of Arados to the north and Tripolis to the south. But to say that is immediately to reveal how little impression we have of the trading role of these very modest places under the Empire. There is no doubt of course that cargoes could be picked up by trading ships moving along this coast either southwards, to Egypt, or more importantly northwards and then along southern Asia Minor to the central Mediterranean. St. Paul, on his last missionary journey, took a ship going from Patara southwards to Tyre, Ptolemais and Caesarea (*Acts* 21. 1-16). Then, when sent to appear before Caesar, he was put on another going northwards, from Caesarea to Sidon, Cyprus and Myra, where he was transferred to an Alexandrian corn-ship bound for Rome (27. 1-6). The Pseudo-Clementines also contain a quite detailed account of a voyage up the Phoenician coast, stopping at a number of places.[51] We do not need to multiply testimonies, for it is beyond doubt that, once at the coast, goods could be transferred to the Mediterranean sea-trade. High-value, low-volume cargoes could easily be put on such ships as *Acts* describes. But have we any concrete evidence that such cargoes, transported from the interior, were in fact traded on the Phoenician coast? The answer is somewhat embarrassing, namely a single passage of Galen. It comes in his description of how he collected specimens of chemicals and drugs on a journey to Lemnos, Cyprus and Palaestine:[52]

> Moreover I had the good fortune to lay hold of the Indian lycium which had been recently imported to Phoenicia together with the Indian aloe. This happened when I was on my way back from Palaestina, and I was persuaded that the lycium was Indian both by the very fact that it was brought by camels, together with the whole cargo and because the spurious one could not be known to those who brought the lycium as the material from which it is prepared is not produced in their localities.

Galen makes his reasoning quite clear: the Indian product, *lycium*, could be regarded as being both authentically Indian and as having been imported overland, since the whole consignment

[50] See Millar, *Roman Near East* (see n.11 above), 183-84; see now T. Bauzou, 'Épigraphie et Topographie: le cas de la Palmyrène du sud-ouest', *Syria* 70 (1993) 27-50.

[51] *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitiones, Homelies* XII-XIII.

[52] Galen, *de simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis*, ed. Kühn vol. XII, 215; text with translation in M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* II, fr. 385, whose translation is used here.

had been brought by camels (*φορτίον* here surely refers to the presumed transport by land). The carriers must therefore, it seems, have come via Palmyra.

Galen's conclusion is of some significance. For *lycium* is among the products which the *Periplus* describes as being imported by sea from north-west India to Egypt.[53] Pliny the Elder also adds that it was sent by 'the Indians' in the skins of camels or rhinoceruses.[54]

Galen does not tell us where these caravans reached the Phoenician coast, or indeed precisely where he acquired the goods. But his presumption is enough to produce further possible candidates for the title of 'caravan city': Emesa, whose rise and fall, as Seyrig suggested, exactly parallels that of Palmyra to its east;[55] perhaps even Laodicea ad Libanum – if geographic determinism really determined anything, and if trade had been a major factor in the growth of cities, this place ought to have been one of the major cities of the ancient world. For it lies in the Homs gap between Palmyra and the sea, and just where that route crosses the Orontes as it flows north from the rich Beqa' valley, towards Apamea and Antiochia. The vast tell of ancient Qadesh shows that in the past it had indeed been a major city. But in the Roman Empire it was not.

If we survey what we have found, bearing in mind how slight our literary evidence is, so that negative arguments – suggesting the non-existence of trade-routes – could never rest securely on it, we find that there certainly were well-known long-distance trade-routes by land. Firstly, in the south of the Roman Near East, it is quite clear that trade did cover the vast distance by land from the Yemen through the Hedjaz to the Mediterranean at Gaza or Rhinocoloura. It ran in parallel with a sea-trade which might bring goods from the Indian Ocean to either the Egyptian or the Arabian shore of the Red Sea. Goods brought originally by either means might well pass through Petra. But much more evidence would be needed before we could properly characterise Petra as a 'caravan city', rather than as a royal capital, and then modest provincial city, situated in a zone where agriculture was possible, and a number of minor settlements also existed. The emerging evidence of the newly-discovered sixth-century papyri from Petra makes this agricultural hinterland visible for the first time.[56]

Rather further north, it is probable that a trade-route ran south-eastwards from the Hauran and Bostra through the Wadi Sirhan to Dumatha and then to the Gulf. But we have so far no idea of the volume or nature of any such trade, or whether it will have had any effect on the character of cities in the provincial area. Just conceivably, trade from this direction, or that continuing northwards from Petra, may have passed through Gerasa, whose fine central plaza, with its unique oval shape, suggested to Rostovtzeff a possible role as a meeting-place for caravans. But given the rich territory of Gerasa, no such explanation for the architectural grandeur of the city is required. As with Damascus itself, where various trade-routes may have met, we can only say that the evidence, while it does not exclude, also does not require any characterisation of it as a trading, or 'caravan', city.

It should be stressed emphatically that if long-distance trade by land had been important anywhere, it should have been not in this southern zone but in the north, where traffic along the Fertile Crescent will have reached the Mediterranean, crossing the Euphrates at Zeugma

[53] See Casson, *op.cit.* (n.3), esp. 16-17; 192-93.

[54] Pliny, *NH* 12.15/31.

[55] See H. Seyrig, 'Caractères de l'histoire d'Émèse', *Syria* 36 (1959) 184-92.

[56] L. Koenen, 'The carbonized archive from Petra', *JRA* 9 (1996) 177-88.

or near Hierapolis and proceeding towards Beroea (Aleppo) and Antochia, and then the fine ports founded in the early Seleucid period, Seleucia and Laodicea. If we look in the other direction, eastwards to Central Asia, all the concrete indications are that traffic followed the Euphrates and Tigris south-eastwards at least as far as Seleucia on the Tigris, and that it was (at least) characteristic for it to continue further to Mesene. There this land trade-route became a sea-route, in which ships sailed first to 'Scythia', the north-west corner of the Indian sub-continent, and might go further south along the coast, and on occasion to Taprobane (Sri Lanka) or into the Bay of Bengal.

This is not the place to explore the sea-trade in the Indian Ocean, illuminated now by a Greek contract on papyrus drawn up at Muziris.[57] What is important is to stress that in 'Scythia', as the *Periplus* (39;48) shows, silk and Chinese pelts were obtainable. According to the *Periplus* (64) goods from China could be brought overland through Bactria and then to northern India, reaching the sea either by being carried down the Ganges to the Bay of Bengal or at Barygaza, one of the ports of 'Scythia'.

We can take it as certain, therefore, that caravans did leave the central and northern areas of the Roman Near East, and did travel down the great river-systems to the Gulf, where the sea-trade to India put them in contact with goods brought overland from China. These considerations must raise the question of whether there was indeed a trade-route following the alternative itinerary which Isidorus maps out in his *Parthian Stations*, from Seleucia north-eastwards across the Zagros, to Media and Bactria – and then hypothetically continuing, as Isidorus' route does not, eastwards to China. Finds of Chinese products in the Mediterranean area, for instance fragments of Chinese silk at Palmyra,[58] would obviously, of themselves, not prove the existence of a Central-Asian route, as opposed to any other. However, it would be absurd to deny that there were indeed a number of land-routes through Central Asia, or that trade travelled along them, in both directions. The first book of Ptolemy's *Geography* shows both that such routes were known and that they were used for trade: hence for instance Ptolemy's indication of a journey of 26,280 stades from the crossing of the Euphrates near Hierapolis to the 'Stone Tower', and 36,200 from there to China.[59]

The evidence on these Central Asia trade-routes cannot be considered here.[60] All that needs to be asserted is that there were indeed 'caravans' using long-distance routes, both within the area of the Roman provinces (which in the 190's came to include northern Mesopotamia) and outside it, and that they characteristically tended to go as far as the 'Kings' Canal' which joined the Euphrates and Tigris. What the relative importance was, after that point, of the overland route north-eastwards and the land-sea route south-eastwards cannot be determined.

[57] See eg. the articles collected in *Topoi Orient-Occident* 3.2 (1993), under the title 'Inde, Arabie et Méditerranée orientale'.

[58] See eg. Parlasca, *op.cit.* (n.46).

[59] Ptolemy, *Geog.* I, 11, 3.

[60] A full study of this question would require a survey of archaeological finds both along the possible routes and at either end, as well as an analysis of literary and documentary evidence relating to journeys, and to social and economic structures. For some relevant approaches see eg. M. Raschke, 'New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East', *ANRW* II.9.2 (Berlin 1972) 604-1361; W. H. Haussig, *Die Geschichte Zentralasiens und der Seidenstrasse in vorislamischer Zeit* (Darmstadt 1983); R. Whitfield and A. Farrer (eds.), *Caves of the Thousand Buddhas: Chinese Art from the Silk Route* (London 1990). I am very grateful to Jessica Rawson for a valiant attempt to reduce my ignorance in this area.

Were there then 'caravan cities'? All that can be said is that there were a large number of places through which long-distance trade will have passed. In the case of none of them, with one exception, does the evidence require a characterisation in terms of their trading role, as opposed to normal political or social functions, or an economic role in relation to the surrounding territory. But to say that is categorically not to prove a negative; it is to leave the question open.

The one exception is of course Palmyra. Even here, modern research has revealed the local geographical factors which made possible the existence of a city, as it has also the existence of an extensive hinterland where agriculture was practised. As it happens, precisely this is demonstrated by the actual character of the famous tax law. It is also of fundamental importance that all our extensive local evidence on the long-distance land- (and sea-) trade at Palmyra is due to a local variant of one of the most distinctive features of the political structure of the actual city: the honorific inscription as a specimen of the 'epigraphic habit'. In that sense, even Palmyra conforms to Finley's general view that trade has to be seen as 'embedded' in a political structure. For what is categorically 'embedded' in this sense is the whole of the documentation on which our knowledge of Palmyrene trade depends.

That said, however, the real world which the honorific inscriptions do (partially) reveal is indeed one of caravans organised to travel across the steppe for purposes of trade, with merchants and 'chief merchants', and 'caravan leaders' taking steps to protect themselves against the nomads, either by negotiation or by suitable payments or by actual physical force. Even Palmyra did not live only by or for long-distance trade. But it is precisely the distinctive nature of the services for which its leading citizens might be honoured which makes it impossible to deny that Palmyra at least was indeed a 'caravan city'.

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